

**The Four Sublime States:
Doctrine and Practice
in Buddhism**

by **Thich Vien Ly**

Edited with Introduction
by **Thich An Hue**

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Editors Notes

This text was written from material prepared by the author for his lectures at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.) in the Extension Course: “Buddhism in the Modern World”, winter quarter, 1997.

There are no diacritical marks in this edition because of the limitations of the publisher’s software. Diacritical marks will be included for the Pali and Sanskrit in future editions.

In nearly all cases in the main sections of the book, all Buddhist terms, and terms relevant to the subject, are rendered in Pali. The exceptions for expressions in Sanskrit are so noted.

*This book is dedicated to my master,
Most Venerable Thich Ke Chau,
who died in Vietnam,
To my parents,
and to the observance of
human rights for my Vietnamese countrymen
and all people throughout the world*

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Introduction

Given there is a universal understanding of a norm of moral and ethical standards which cuts across civilized cultures and societies, human beings learn to initiate traditions to guide them in all of their endeavors – their work, worship and prayers – for happiness. For some, happiness comes through material gains, for others by spiritual quest. Such human behavior is learned as appropriate actions which follow the mores of the society. People adopt those folkways which they consider beneficial to the welfare of the majority within a given culture. Their adherence to such behavior is reinforced through continued observance of the laws of society.

The *Buddha-Dhamma* developed in response to the struggle of people searching for happiness. What is known now as the *dhamma* are those sermons, *suttas* – or discourses – and sayings of Sakyamuni Buddha, mostly written down by his disciples long after his passing away in the fifth century before the Christian Era (B.C.E.). These teachings of the Buddha give both spiritual guidelines for his doctrines and specific methods by which his followers could find release from suffering, following the path of enlightenments to *nibbana* and find true happiness by terminating the cycle of birth and

death. Ancient Buddhist literature emphasizes four states, or conditions, for a peaceful, happy life. Known as **Sublime States**, these states, as taught in Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, are to be attained by the practice of the *jhanas*, or “meditations in the realm of pure form”. They are termed “sublime”, because they are concerned with the control and the practice of lofty spiritual qualities. These four states are referred to in this text by their common terms, viz. lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

The Four Sublime States – lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, or joyousness and equanimity – are found in the Buddha’s dialogues with, and directions to, his disciples as spoken and written for the purpose of teaching. The Buddha’s formulae for happiness lie in many *suttas*, sermons, dialogues, in the *Dhammapada* – but the most direct doctrine and methods of achieving happiness are found in the Four Sublime States. Illustrated by the order given is the hierarchical character of the related conditions for living the true *dhamma*. They are, first, conditions of the mind, or “attitudes”.

Understanding them as *sublime*, each human being has to develop positive attitudes – that is, those mental sets of dispositions and opinions connected with each Sublime State. In practice, one begins to realize that these four are sublime in the sense of exalted, boundless, limitless, etc.

These are referred to in the scriptures of all Buddhist translations. Some translate the term as “The Divine Abidings”. In the *Abhidhamma* and Mahayana literature they are called the “measureless states”. Mrs. Rhys Davids, British scholar of Indian and Buddhist philosophy and eminent translator of the Buddhist Pali canon, cites these as Sublime Moods, or the Illimitables, and defines them as a discipline for control of emotions, or behavior. They are philosophical as well as actual states of being, and are conditions to be achieved by the practice of meditation. These four states are taught, each one and in its sequential order, as subjects of meditation.

This book is organized according to a method of natural progression by sections. Starting from a straight forward approach to introduce the philosophy of the condition of mind in the Four Sublime States, the discussion leads to interrelated thoughts, constant adjustment of attitudes into positive realms and the need for stabilizing emotions in order to attain a happy and peaceful state. It is suggested that this condition of mind can be reached, and a primary understanding of the *brahma-vihara* gained, only by moral and virtuous practice through the progressive process of mindful awakening. The *jhanas* are the purposeful attention during meditation practice.

In this text, the cultivation of the mind through meditation known as *samadhi* (Pali and Sanskrit) is stressed by referring to writers who have explored and taught the five *jhanas*. Pham Cong Thien, noted Vietnamese Buddhist scholar and author, states that to practice meditation in the fine material world, or in the realm of pure form (*rupadhatu*), we can derive valuable experience by dwelling among the sustained ways of solitude and silence.

In his writings, Professor Thien cites Pali commentators on the blissful experience of the meditations in the “realm of pure form”. These are summarized as follows:

- the first *jhana* is accompanied by thinking (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicara*), joy (*piti*), happiness (*sukha*) and one-pointedness (*ekaggata*);
- the second *jhana* is accompanied by sustained thought, joy, happiness and one-pointedness;
- the third *jhana* is accompanied by joy, happiness and one-pointedness;
- the fourth *jhana* by happiness and one-pointedness;
- the fifth *jhana* by equanimity (*upekkha*) and one-pointedness.

According to Lama Anagarika Govinda, “one-pointedness is said to exist in every act of consciousness as a kind of immanent tendency of direction, but in the case of meditation, and especially in the higher states of absorption (or meditation – *jhana*), this factor is raised to a definite state of concentration”. Meditation itself is completely transformed into proper absorption; that is what we call *samadhi* in Sanskrit.

From his many years of personal experience in teaching the *Dhamma*, precise examination of current psychological and Buddhist references and presentations of material compiled for this book, the author has found it important to go beyond merely stating the need for the reader, the listener and the learner to relate the subject to meditation practice. He attempts to give more guidance than just saying, “meditate on the Four Sublime States”. The need is to press deeper into the methods of Buddhist meditation practice. To be more critical of the expression “meditate on” would require more explanation of the involvement in practice far beyond the scope of this text.

Emphasis on mindfulness and concentration has been made throughout the book. With full descriptions of the Four Sublime States, we hope to provide the reader with an adequate understanding and impetus for further investigation of the subject. In the description of these terms, the reader with leanings both in Theravada and Mahayana, can be motivated to search deeper into the *jhanas*. As wisdom grows from extended concentration and self-examination, one’s mind grows, expanding to a greater sphere – even in reflection back on the simple acts of beginning practice. In more advanced practice, personal inventories of acts omitted and acts committed can be taken in quiet meditation periods. These lead to the factors contributing to ethics and morality. Stating briefly, as Thich Nhat Hanh explains, the scope and practice of meditation is twofold – to **stop** and to **see**: *samadhi* is stopping, and *vipassana* is observing to understand.

The Four Sublime States, or “immeasurables” are guides to helping one view his/her behavior as benevolent, first to oneself, then extending the “rights” of the Eight-Fold Path to all other beings. The degrees necessary for concentration come through the heart of meditation practice. Students are reminded to follow the breath and repeat silently: “breathing in calms my body/ breathing out I clear my mind”. The deep breaths, mindful inhalation and exhalation, calmness of body, clarity of mind and our feelings of body and emotions reflect the basis of consciousness. The objects of meditation are the *brahma-vihara*: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

This book is meant as an instructional text in addressing the scope and explanation of the Four Sublime States with the process of meditation practice. However, the author feels that including the short history of Sakyamuni Buddha’s life in the *Afterword* will afford a clearer understanding of the Buddha’s teachings.

- *Thich An Hue (Claude Ware, Ph.D.)*
Spring 1998

Section I: Present Moment of Mind: Happiness and Awareness

Human behavior may be described as actions predicated by the merging of external environmental conditions with one's intellect and feelings about those conditions. Buddhist teachings relate emotional feelings (desires and wants) to the dictates of an individual's self or ego, and stress that attachment to cravings and the self is the basic cause of suffering, ignorance and rebirth. The Four Sublime States (*brahma-vihara*), or "The Art of Noble Living", discussed in this text are presented as aspects of Buddhist practice which can alleviate the human condition arising solely from the dictates of the self or ego. This is a self-regulating system which can be controlled by the practice of mindfulness using the three sustaining factors of the Buddha's teaching – virtue (*sila*), concentration (*Samadhi*), wisdom (*panna*).

There are numerous conditional sets of actions and reactions resulting from constant adjustments to various situations in life from day to day, and many times from minute to minute.

We are all aware of the various ways by which the signs and signals from our environment dictate what we do and how we feel. We change clothing to adjust to the weather, stop for red lights, quarrel about traffic conditions, protest over mistreatment, etc. The dynamic arrangement of environmental stimuli controls us to the extent that it meshes with our psychological, or mental being. But, humans are not confined to strict behavioral commands, as animals are, because we have a will, a psyche which allows us options to perform as we wish, choosing our actions in responding to given situations which can result in happiness and in our best interest. We can make decisions to help fulfill our needs and wants.

Humans make decisions based upon information which is constantly being processed – information from memory of past experiences and evaluation of the current state of our lives. There is a continual adjustment to one's life conditions for wants, desires and needs. Human emotions ideally should be unrelated to the drive of "self" or "ego" in making purposeful decisions. On the contrary, because of uncontrolled emotions, humans usually make irrational, inappropriate decisions with strict ego involvement. In many instances, without being mindful – one makes decisions and takes actions based upon false judgments. We learn that even carefully thought-out decisions do not always make one happy, and hopefully, we learn to adjust to them adequately.

In making mindful decisions regarding the importance of having material "things", and providing a comfortable condition of life, there may be some conflict between "wants" and "needs". The process of negotiating one's wants with true needs (for emotional and physical comfort or survival) should be based upon something of a hierarchy of needs, or "first things first". Abraham Maslow, noted American psychologist, argues in *Eupsychian Management...* the balance of human survival with happiness dictates that basic physiological needs are to be satisfied before we can move up the hierarchical triangle to LOVE and SELF-ESTEEM, the ability and opportunity to obtain gratification for our efforts, our basic livelihood being based primarily upon physiological **needs**. Wants may not be necessarily lower in status than needs, but our mind must be trained to recognize the difference. Wants, in Buddhist thinking, may be the desire to satisfy grasping, ego-drive, shallow thoughts and the like. Maslow agrees with Buddhist teachings, that from the basic physiological needs to the gratifying of emotional needs, peak experiences – the probable experience of enlightenment – are produced by each individual in his or her pursuit of the Path of Purification to *Nibbana*.

In the reality of seeking happiness in this life, there is an inner need in every human being to make continuous adjustments between extremes and opposites to reach a middle-way between optimism-pessimism, negatives-positives, gain-loss, and advance-retreat. One does not lean to opposite conditions which demand one's constant adjustment. In a Buddhist and psychological sense, one adjusts one's feelings **about** the opposites only to identify the conflicts which need to be resolved. In attempting to stabilize our emotions to become resolute in a happy and peaceful state, there is a position we learn to take. As Buddhists we are taught to behave (act) in a moral or virtuous (*sila*) way according to the Five Precepts, the Noble Eight-Fold Path and other ethical principles which include the Four Sublime States.

Awareness, attention, consciousness, and the like, are states of mind which we constantly utilize in direction thoughts to take actions in ways which we can control. Being mindful of what we are thinking, speaking and doing is one way of practicing mind-control. With the guidance of a "master" and understanding and practicing these teachings, we become mindful by regular meditation practice. Through it we learn little by little to adjust our lives to ethical standards laid down in the Sublime States. Learning and control do not happen suddenly and do not stay without sustained application and practice. As practice deepens, over time, one becomes more mindful of the objectives of inner peace and happiness. Moreover, our devotion grows with greater resolution and fervor.

There is known to be a progressive order of mindful awakening. Mindfulness is the resulting state of being. Adjustments to life's conditions may be as one says, "I am always changing my mind". Does changing one's mind mean changing a physical situation or an emotion state? Mind is the primary condition of life from day to day. Being mindful and practicing mindfulness are terms often used to explain a condition of mind. The *Dhammapada* [Narada Thera, 1993, p.5] states: 'Mind is the forerunner of all (good) states. Mind is chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves.'

When we want to take action to do something, we have to be mindful of what we are thinking and feeling. We think ahead **into** our actions. All of our thoughts and feelings are determined by our mind. In making up our mind to do something, all thoughts and feelings are directed to what thing itself. It is the mind that determines the condition and resulting consequences. To be mindful of what we do is also saying that we have to be careful not to make quick judgments or not forget things. We must give heed to, and apply ourselves to each situation or condition. We have to be attentive to our own being and its various modes of presence (or absence) in the context of the present, fleeting moment. Mindfulness is the *gestalt*, the resulting interactions of all these elements. Our life, our present existence, is just a fleeting moment on this earth. Even our consciousness is no longer than a moment which is almost gone before we can conjure up a thought. Some human behavior studies show that the brain can sustain a single thought no longer than six seconds. Buddhist psychology assesses the speed of thought to be much higher. A "thought-moment" or "conscious-moment" (*citta-kkhana*) lasts no longer than a billionth part of an eye-wink or a flash of lighting. To emphasize this brevity of time, The *Diamond Sutra* quotes the Buddha in Sect. XXXII [Price & Wong]

'Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:

A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;

A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.’

It is said in *Anguttara Nikaya* (I, 10): ‘Nothing, O monks, do I know that changes so rapidly as consciousness. Scarcely anything may be found that could be compared with this so rapidly changing consciousness.’ In the *Visuddhimagga* (VIII, 39): ‘...in the ultimate sense, the life moment of living beings is extremely short, being only as much as the occurrence of a single conscious moment. Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls...only on one point of the circumference of its tyre, and, when it is at rest, rests only on one point, so too, the life of living beings lasts only for a single conscious moment. When that consciousness has ceased, the being is said to have ceased.’ [B. Buddhaghosa].

Every moment of our life comes to be, then lingers for an instant, and quickly disappears in a flash. Remembering that, whenever we want to do something, we have to be mindful of this present fleeting moment. As written in the *Bodhicaryavatara*:

‘Once met, it yields the welfare of mankind. If the advantage is neglected now, how will this meeting come again? At night in darkness, thick with clouds, a lightning flash gives a moment’s brightness. So, sometimes by the power of the Buddha, the mind of the world might, for a moment, turn to acts of merit.’ [Santideva]

The first act of the merit is what we do right now; that means simply that we are reading about the teaching of the Buddha, giving our mind to this favorable moment – a moment’s brightness, a perfect opportunity, so hard to meet, leading to the achievement of human well-being. As we will come to know, we must be mindful of every passing thought and feeling during the entire time. And yet, whenever some distraction arises in our mind, we will be mindful to its arising and set our mind to this meaningful thought-moment, here and now. If we know how to do this, we will be capable of dwelling in the heart of meditation. Only if we understand the essence of mediation can we see the moment’s flash which opens up new world of thoughts, feelings and actions.

Section II: Culture of the Heart by Wisdom, Concentration and Virtue

Meditation is learning how to direct many thought-moments bombarding one’s mind all within a second to a “one-pointedness of mind.” The essence of meditation is to clear the mind – that is, to clear the mind of every thought. How does one begin this process? Starting on the journey is the difficult part right after one decides to proceed. A novice or beginner finds Buddhist meditation, as discussed in text and scholarly writings, difficult to understand. Many Buddhist devotees, therefore, attend regular services of chanting and *Dhamma* lectures and seek to practice meditation under a master’s guidance. Meditation practice is necessary beyond the spiritual discoveries of the Way – the true Buddha’s Path.

In ensuing general discussion of meditation and its purposes, what is intended is to introduce the subject and give the reader information beneficial to practice? Culture of the heart, or rather the **mind**, is the first job confronting one in developing meditation techniques. Right Mindfulness (meditation), the seventh step of the Noble-Eight-Fold Path, leads to the last one – Right Concentration (*samadhi* and insight).

Of the three “pillars” of Buddhist belief and teaching, wisdom (*panna*) concentration (*samadhi*) and virtue (*sila*), the Buddha has placed great emphasis on virtue as the necessary basis for mental development for culture of the mind. Attention to morality, and following moral standards and ethics, regulates relations between and individual and his/her progress. Morality must be guided and ensured by precepts and rules, which need, by all means, to be explained in common-sense terms. There may be controversy and strong disagreement among Buddhist scholars and practitioners as to which would come first: the motivation and the attitude of wanting to practice morality, or the zealous practice of compassion.

Viewing this argument in strictly “human behavioral” terms (and not “religious”), the question would be raised, “can an individual extend a compassionate hand to another living being without the motivation to be moral and to follow virtuous precepts? Some think that morality can be regulated in a religious sense, and that compassion is not a natural human instinct. This debate would undoubtedly lead both sides to the conclusion that compassion needs to be taught as an object of meditation, and in-depth review and discussions of the Noble-Eight-Fold Path is necessary for resolution. As noted earlier, *Dhamma* teachings on the seventh and eighth steps – “Right Mindfulness” and “Right Concentration” need to be addressed.

In Buddhist teachings, morality, or “culture of the heart” or of the mind, has a special place and is given in truth in The Four Sublime States; expressed by Piyadassi Thera in *Buddhist Meditation*, there are four *brahma-vihara*:

- Lovingkindness or universal love (*metta*)
- Compassion (*karuna*)
- Sympathetic joy or Altruistic joy (*mudita*)
- Equanimity (*upekkha*)

We also think of *sila* (morality) as the indispensable basis for the *brahma-vihara*, as the *brahma-vihara* is placed between the *rupa* (material) and the *arupa* (non-material) states of meditation.

The *brahma-vihara* can be taken as subjects of meditation to help the practitioner see more clearly into ways to cultivating the mind and bringing about stronger heart-centered feelings. Hearing lectures on the Four Sublime States, reading descriptions of what they are, and delving deeply into their meaning are all important for an intellectual understanding. But, this level of investigation is only superficial and remains so until one begins serious and profound meditation practice. In *Buddhist Meditation*, Piyadassi Thera writes:

‘*Subha-vimokkha* is another term by which these qualities of the heart are known. It means deliverance of the mind (*vimokkha*) through recognition of the good (*subha*) in others. Instead of seeing the evil in others, the meditator sees the good in them and cultivates the Four Sublime States... The *brahma-vihara*... can also be taken as subjects of meditation then it is called “*brahma-vihara bhavana*”, the meditative developments of the Sublime States. By cultivating these positive virtues one can maintain a calm and pure mind.’ [Piyadassi, 1979]

Section III: Bhavana Meditation on the Sublime States

One important starting point for anyone beginning meditation practice, whether new to Buddhism or not, is to try to discard all thought and ideas about spiritual beings, the use of mantra, visualizations, fantasies, raising one’s consciousness and the

like. The **natural state of mind** is what we are after – at the beginning and throughout our lives. The potential for living one’s life in a wakeful, receptive, non-judgmental way, with the prospect of liberation, egolessness and awakening may be taught by an ordained Buddhist minister or qualified lay teacher, not as a dogmatic or philosophical religious belief but rather as a direct experience within reach of everyone. Emerging spiritually to a higher, non-material level of consciousness is assisted through guidance by the teacher, and one may get a glimpse of a mindful state – in the midst of a confused and busy life.

Buddhist meditation techniques are based primarily upon the experiences of the Buddha and the ways he transmitted these experiences to his disciples. In the religious pursuit, embracing faith, belief and practice become the essential factors. In a brief treatment in this text, we will address the technique and practice of *samadhi*. Meditation is the process of developing a higher form of consciousness. This condition is attained through meditation skills diligently practiced, and not by setting a “super-human” state as the goal.

Samadhi is defined as *cittassa ekaggata*, one pointedness of mind; it is described as the dominant factor in the process of eliminating sensory impressions from the mind. *Samadhi* and consciousness are not synonymous terms, but it is *Samadhi* which occurs in the highest realm of consciousness. In a psychological analysis in the *Abhidhamma*, it is said that one can not begin the practice of *ekaggata* until a cleansing of all immoral thoughts has begun. This is common to all states of consciousness, whether pure or impure. The word *kusala* when added to the term *cittekaggata*, one-pointedness of mind, designates the practice of eliminating impure, sensory and evil thoughts.

At this point, by instructing the meditator on the “Five Hindrances” (see Section V), and ways to eliminate them, one emphasizes the importance of “emptying-out”, that is, eliminating unwholesome or evil thoughts. Evil thoughts may or may not be purposefully brought up during formal meditation practice. In emptying-out impure thoughts, one takes in wholesome thoughts as indicated by the Four Sublime States – lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Through devout and diligent practice, this replacement, or exchange, can take place: that is, for example, replacing thoughts of hate and jealousy with love and wishes of well-being. This practice of *bhavana*, or mental development, i.e. meditation by means of development, applies to both *Samadhi* and *Vipassana* meditation practice.

Paravahera Vajranana Mahathera, in *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* explains further:

‘It is true that in “Bhavana” there is a certain thought process, similar to that involved in mental prayer, and also the repetition of some particular words or phrases in different practices, such as “Be happy, be happy” in the practice of Metta;... But “Bhavana” is more than that. It is “thinking” in a special manner, to edify something in oneself, something which is always good. The essential thing, therefore, in “Bhavana” is its productive factor... For example, when one practices “Metta bhavana”, one not only think upon “friendliness” but makes it come into being, and grow stronger and stronger in his mind, so as to eradicate thoughts of enmity, malice, aversion and the like; and finally the aspirant becomes friendly towards all living things. In this sense it is “becoming”. ... “Bhavana” means the accumulation of all good qualities within oneself, to become apt and fit for the attainment of Nirvana.’

Meditation on the Four Sublime States is a process to engage in under the guidance of a competent teacher. It begins with some simple techniques of putting the mind at rest in the realm of not how to produce these states, but only in taking note of them through the dimension of relativity, not absoluteness. These observations may be uncomplicated, but expressing the feelings they generate is highly complex.

We have emphasized throughout this text the importance of mindfulness in everything we think and do. Being mindful of feelings is not a simple endeavor, and willingness and the resultant expressions (verbally or by one’s actions) leaves that person – in human behavioral terms – “emotionally vulnerable” and liable to criticism. Therefore, to assume that expressing one’s views and feelings is uncomplicated suggests that mindfulness meditation is the way to help remove these human behavioral stumbling blocks. Verbalizing one’s views and feelings can sometimes be highly complicated and emotionally a difficult thing to do. We have found that mindfulness in daily activities, as well as on our meditation cushion, can help one recognize and remove these barriers to morality (*sila*). In our discussion on techniques and principles of meditation, we will find that certain types of meditation will provide ways for one to develop willingness to express true feelings.

Initial understanding of these four terms (and practices) – lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity – will most certainly be related to the experiences and attitudes of each individual; therefore, each person is encouraged to reject his and her pre-judged idea of the bare meaning of each term and try to imagine a relationship of (1) one notion with each of the other three and (2) the accumulated “mystical” energy of all four taken in unity. Once these relationships are recognized, the devotee starts with zero concepts and definitions of the words. In the context of the *jhanas*, and later Zen master’s teaching, we start from the void and end with the void – not taking the **self** with us, but returning to **emptiness** (*sunyata*). We will discuss the *jhanas*, and more detailed methods of meditation practice in the remaining sections of the text.

According to the “Sangiti-Suttanta” (in *Digha-Nikaya*, 33), there are three Encompassing Abodes:

1. The Heavenly Abode (*dibba-vihara*)
2. The Divine Abode (*brahma-vihara*)
3. The Noble Abode (*ariya-vihara*)

We will begin our discussion here of the four abodes of the Divine Abode (lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity). The *Brahma-vihara* can be selected even by the novice practitioner as the subject of meditation. A devout teacher will refer to these as “qualities of the heart”, and they help anyone engaging in sincere practice to open his and her heart and mind to these ideals of Buddhist beliefs. In cultivating the four sublime states, the mind can be delivered to a state of “liberation: or “deliverance” (*vimokkha*). The three liberations are:

1. Conditionless, or signless (*animitta-vimokkha*)
2. Desireless (*apanihita-vimokkha*)
3. Emptiness, or void (*sunyata-vimokkha*)

The four sublime states are found in this “triple Gateway to Liberation” (*vimokkha-mukha*). These states are known as “boundless” (*appamannayo*) as they have no boundaries or dimensions. As we think of spiritual states or conditions, the

universality of sacred and devoted entities – as they stand alone – gives us the notion of being in flight without any barriers: thus, they are known as “sublime”, exalted and majestic. But, they are within reach of every earnest meditator.

No living being is outside the circle of these qualities, which make no distinction between rich or poor, intelligent or ignorant, saint or sinner. They do not discriminate, and as we see, the peak of their attainment is “equanimity” – without discrimination! The general purpose of the four “Divine Abidings”, as pointed out in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhi Magga, IX 97)*, is to emphasize the bliss of insight (gain through meditation) and a model for one’s future existence...

‘That peculiar to each is respectively the warding off of ill will...’ This continues:... ‘lovingkindness has the purpose of warding off ill will, while the others have the respective purpose of warding off cruelty, aversion (boredom), and greed or resentment’. Further explained:

‘For this is the escape from ill will ...the mind deliverance of loving-kindness. ...For this is the escape from cruelty ...the mind-deliverance of compassion. For this is the escape from aversion (boredom) ...the mind deliverance of gladness’ (i.e. sympathetic joy). ...For this is the escape from greed ...the mind-deliverance of equanimity.’ (*Visuddhi Magga*, 1991)

One is able to generate a calm and pure mind by cultivating these qualities. They are in consonance preached to devotees in all religions – Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu and many minor sects. We practice these for self-development, for if we can not love ourselves then there can be no empathy and feeling of true spiritual love for others. In a *mantra* of lovingkindness we can say, “I am well, I am happy, I am free”. Then, this thought is repeated to all others in our personal domain – wishing wellness, happiness and freedom to friends, relatives, teachers and perhaps even people you know who may consider you their enemy. The most difficult task is to wish wellness and love to those who are not extending these gifts to us. But, what other way is there to mend relationships, whether we have caused the ruff or not? If lovingkindness and compassion must come from only one direction – let the gift be ours. Let us now look at each one of these Sublime States in ways which they can be drawn mindfully into our daily lives.

Lovingkindness (*metta*) is the factor of our emotions which endears one to oneself, and in gracious well-being to all others, unconditionally. It is for the happiness and joy of all beings that lovingkindness is directed. It must not be for the sake of lust, sensuality and greed of possessiveness. As emphasized by Piyadassi Thera in *Buddhist Meditation*, at the onset one must guard against these masked enemies. Love is wishing for welfare to go to all beings when extended universally and is directed toward a family member or acquaintance in a personal relationship. Love, in Buddhist sense, should be unconditional, limitless, boundless, and non-attached and without expectation. How can one think that love is non-attached? If we truly love another being, it seems that the attachment of “love” is necessary, otherwise where is this thing called **love** going?

During the time we are feeling love for a lover – which may be short in overall duration – the strength of our love is gripping and we put all we have into it. The love for our parents should be cherished to the point that nothing can shake it. Love is not always an emotion of joy and fulfillment, for that love shared by two people may wane. On one-to-one, or in a family situation, the lack of being mindful and conjoint meditation on *metta* permits a crevice in this bonded relationship; soon doubt (of another’s true love), ignorance and hate creep in. Ignorance is the lack of communication with others about one’s feelings and results in hate because of distrust and jealousy.

Meditation on *metta* is the best prescription for the disease of anger. Anger can be resolved in our meditation practice and through repeated mindful recitations of the well-wishing mantra: “May they be well, happy and free”. We know hate destroys, but only letting-go of that hate is not enough. It must be replaced, at first with just the intent to regain love. *Metta* once lost can be regained, within oneself and with another being. Lovingkindness is an active force and must be expressed, or exercised, on a daily basis. As Piyadassi Thera emphasizes:

‘If one has developed a love that is truly great, rid of the desire to hold and possess, that strong clean love which is untarnished with lust of any kind, that love which does not expect material advantage and profit from the act of loving, that love which is firm, but not grasping, unshakable but not tied down, gentle and settled, hard and penetrating as a diamond un-hurting, helping but not interfering, cool, invigorating, giving more than taking, not proud but dignified, not sloppy yet soft, the love that leads one to the heights of clean achievement, then in such a one there is no ill-will at all.’ [*Buddhist Meditation*]

An awareness will settle to the top of the muck and mire of the “hate” ingredients. The self-centered reasons for ill-will and hate must be confronted and destroyed and the “hate” image de-materialized to a vapor. One must empty the mind of the idea of hate during each daily mindful meditation. Then that calm, quiet period can be filled with the Lord Buddha’s proclamation:

‘Hatred never by hatred
Is appeased in this world;
By love alone it is appeased.
This is the ancient law’
[*Dhammapada*, 5]

Compassion (*karuna*) is that attribute of the heart so difficult to attain and keep. In most un-rewarding situations of helping others out of their suffering, *karuna* may be the strength of one’s true caring for another human being – but it could soon slip away with fatigue and lethargy on the part of the giver. Compassion is characterized as promoting the alleviation of suffering. Its function of benefiting all humankind is not a condition of bearing others’ sufferings as one’s own. *Karuna* is aroused in our emotions and attitudes because we see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it causes cruelty to subside, and true compassion must not be masked by feelings of sympathy and sorrow for another. Taking on another’s pain as one’s own, is only exacerbating the pain and diminishing the energy which goes with caring and the ability to help. The purpose of helping becomes vacant when we feel and think only sympathy for a vagrant, street-person, someone suffering or a living being in an economic and social level below ours.

Karuna is characterized by Buddhaghosa:

‘...as promoting the aspect of allaying suffering. Its function resides in not bearing other’s suffering. It is manifested as non-cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it makes cruelty subside, and it fails when it produces sorrow.’

Putting oneself in a higher position than those being relieved of suffering is playing into the egotistic attitude of helping. A person may get into this position of trying to be compassionate to erase his/her feelings of guilt, or balance one's *kamma* – to make up for cruelty to another person. Altruism is the unselfish concern for the welfare of others, and compassion is the action taken to extend help. In truth one should say, "I am doing this (good deed) for the complete benefit of others and expect nothing in return."

Compassion is the key to our spiritual life and gives us the opportunity to develop our own Buddha nature. If *metta* is the root of love, then love is the root of compassion. We are taught that humility is the key virtue (*sila*) of Buddhism. In being loving and compassionate, we protect ourselves and we protect others ...by cultivating the "Foundations of Mindfulness" (*Satipatthana*). In the *Samyutta-Nikaya* 47,19, the words of the Buddha:

'...And how does one, by protecting oneself, protect others? By repeated practice (of mindfulness), by its meditative development, and by frequent occupation with it.'

'...And how does one, by protecting others, protect oneself? By patience and by a non-violent life, by lovingkindness and compassion.' [*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Nyanaponika Thera]

The Bodhisattva of Compassion is one who is bent on enlightenment, and in Buddhism we are taught that compassion and wisdom (*panna*) are like the two wings of the bird – one can not gain wisdom without compassion and compassion is guided by wisdom. Some think that expressing compassion is a sign of weakness of spirit, but if one expresses compassion with the energy and strength we have described here, that person will succeed in casting out ill-will from him/herself in the presence of hatred and anger.

Sympathetic Joy is that sublime state where on the good side of a person's living situation there is success in a realm or area of his/her life. This "good fortune" could be in being financially secure and affluent, having a loving family, extended time away from the work-a-day world, living in peace and harmony, etc. We must feel the same joy in another human's acquisition of success and joy, whether it be one who has had this good-fortune for many years or one who has newly acquired this success. We share our joy by congratulating and felicitating the successful person. Sympathetic joy is that attitude we must possess in order to be happy over another's success. The direct enemy of this is jealousy, which as a negative factor, runs through all of the Sublime States, because jealousy and envy are the antitheses of *metta* and promote resentment and hate.

In our competitive world, when one person makes a successful leap into a better work position, it seems that most coworkers, because of inflated egos, think they should have had the new position. On the contrary, they should feel a stronger sense of happiness for the individual who succeeded. We can not be the conscience of those who are jealous, nor sense that we are above adverse feelings. But, we should know that we are liable to resent jealous ones. "Bad luck" or "good luck" may not be the reason for the opportunity one gets to improve his/her life. As we feel happy for the other person, moral character and *kamma* must be recognized as the condition which can improve life.

The term "sympathetic" – describing joy and gladness, can also apply to the identification with others in their ill-fated or unlucky condition. This reaction to other's misery is a carry-over benefit from the previous Sublime State, compassion. In this state, and in the state of being joyous, one practices mindfulness to enter into another person's feelings, emotions and mental state – as "being in sympathy with". We can show others that we identify our feelings with the gladness they feel. In observing that a person is happy in a specific circumstance in life, we express compassion by letting one know that we too are feeling that happiness.

Here, especially, we have to take another's joy into our mindful meditation to affirm that our rejoicing will not be clouded by any thoughts of envy and jealousy. We focus our meditation on the strength to support the individual in this state of gladness. *Mudita* is the attitude of being grateful and accepting one's benefits and merits as well as that of graciousness in sharing this congratulatory gift.

Equanimity (*upekkha*) is the fourth of the Sublime States. It is the resulting condition of "working" the other three through meditation and practice in all areas of life. Lovingkindness, compassion and sympathetic joy must be imbued in our consciousness daily so they become a habit. What will intensify practice and produce results in the way of building moral (*sila*) character? One becomes capable of relinquishing such defeating attitudes as discrimination, control, craving, bigotry, egoism, resentment, un-forgiveness, lust and the like. Without the support of meditation and moral practice daily, we forget too often that all beings are the result of their *kamma*; they are as we see them, but we can be a positive force by showing lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*) and sympathetic joy (*mudita*). *Visuddhi Magga* explains:

'*Equanimity* is characterized as promoting the aspect of neutrality towards beings. Its function is to see equality in beings. It is manifested as the quieting of resentment and approval. Its proximate cause is seeing ownership of deeds (*kamma*) thus: Beings are owners of their deeds. Whose (if not theirs) is the choice by which they will become happy, or will get free from suffering, or will not fall away from the success they have reached?...

Attachment to *metta*, *karuna* and *mudita* can become a burden and an obstruction in arriving at a state of perfection.

Therefore, equanimity is the quality which balances all sublime states, including equanimity itself. Without the forethoughts of *upekkha*, the mind would be always questioning the extent to which one should go toward perfection of others. Equanimity is without prejudice and bias. Piyadassi Thera clarifies this philosophical point by describing the inter-workings of the Four Sublime States: "*Metta* embraces all beings; *karuna* embraces the suffering ones; *mudita* embraces the prosperous; and *upekkha* embraces both the good and bad, the loved and the unloved, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the ugly and the beautiful without making any discrimination." [*Buddhist Meditation*]

Section IV: Freedom of Mind / Freedom from Suffering

Let us look at the Divine Abode and its four inclusive *brahma-vihara* in the position this abode takes in the Three Encompassing Abodes, which we addressed earlier in the text. According to Sangiti-Suttanta (in *Digha-Nikaya*, 33) these are:

1. The Heavenly Abode (*dibba-vihara*)
2. The Divine Abode (*brahma-vihara*)
3. The Noble Abode (*ariya-vihara*)

The Divine Abode is placed in a central position ontologically and “mystically” lower than the Noble Abode (*ariya vihara*) and higher than the Heavenly Abode (*dibba-vihara*) (pp. 88-89). The Heavenly Abode (*dibba-vihara*) is formed of four meditations, the Five *jhana* in the realm of pure form (*rupa-jjhana*); the Noble Abode (*ariya-vihara*) consists of three liberations, or deliverances (*vimokkha*) which are also called “The Triple Gateway to Liberation” (*vimokkha-mukha*.)” They are:

1. Emptiness (*sunyata*)
2. Signlessness (*animitta*)
3. Desirelessness (*apanihita*)

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Triple Gateway to Liberation (or “Three Doors of Liberation”) is interpreted in a completely transcendental way. When the triple Gateway to Liberation is open, wisdom, or understanding (*panna*) will shine forth in all its great radiance.

The Buddha rejected all authority except experience. Each person should gain experience for him/herself, experiment to see that the teaching is true, and not accept it because the Buddha says so. The universe is subject to natural laws only; study and practice give one the freedom from suffering. The most important laws are those of “causation”. Transmigration is acknowledged in that “consciousness” continues from life to life according to moral laws, and innumerable other causes and conditions. Our aim is to end this cycle of transmigration and attain final peace. The Buddha claims here that the objective for all living beings is the attainment of happiness. His teachings deal with ways of achieving this goal, culminating finally in liberation and freedom.

According to the Pali tradition there are two types of freedom (*vimutti*):

1. freedom of mind (*ceto-vimutti*)
2. freedom through wisdom or understanding (*panna-vimutti*)

“Freedom of mind” means freedom from desire through the practice of “absorption” or “calm abiding” (*Samadhi*).

“Freedom through wisdom” (*panna-vimutti*) means freedom from ignorance through the practice of “insight” (*vipassana*) into the three characteristics of existence: (1) impermanence (*anicca*), (2) suffering (*dukkha*) and (3) not-self (*anatta*), and also into the triple Gateway to Liberation, as we read in the previous section.

R.E.A Johnsson, prominent psychologist and lecturer, has also summed up two types of freedom:

1. Freedom of Mind (*ceto-vimutti*)
 - a. calm is cultivated (*samatho bhavito*)
 - b. the mind is developed (*cittam bhaviyati*)
 - c. desire is expelled (*rago pahiyati*)
 - d. step leading to “freedom of mind” (*ceto-vimutti*)
2. Freedom by Understanding (*panna-vimutti*):
 - a. introspection, or insight, is cultivated (*vipassana bhavita*)
 - b. understanding, or wisdom, is developed (*panna bhaviyati*)
 - c. ignorance is expelled (*avijja pahiyati*)
 - d. the first three steps leading to “freedom through understanding” (*panna-vimutti*)

From what is said in Tevijja Sutta (*Digha Nikaya*, XIII), the Four Abodes of the *brahma-vihara* lead to “freedom of mind” or “freeing of mind” (*ceto-vimutti*)

The position of the Four Sublime States of the Divine Abodes (*brahma-vihara*) is made explicit by the following synopsis:

1. The Three Abodes:
 - a. The Heavenly Abode (*dibba-vihara*) consists of Four Meditations in the Realm of Pure Form;
 - b. The Divine Abode (*brahma-vihara*) consists of Four Immeasurables: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity;
 - c. The Noble Abode (*ariya-vihara*) consists of the Triple Gateway to Liberation: emptiness, signlessness, and desirelessness.
2. The Four Divine Abodes belong to “Freedom of Mind” (*ceto-vimutti*)
3. The Noble Abode (the triple Gateway to Liberation) belongs to Freedom through Insight or Understanding.
4. The Four Divine Abodes are placed **after** the Four Meditations in the Realm of Pure Form and **before** the Four Meditations in the Realm of Non-Form (*arupavacara*).
5. The Four Divine Abodes belong to *samatha* (tranquility, calm abiding) or *samadhi* (absorption), and the Noble Abode is identical with *vipassana* (insight) or *panna* (wisdom).

Section V: Overcoming the Fetters and Mental Hindrances

It is not easy for ordinary human beings to be capable of dwelling in any abode among the various abodes mentioned above, since it is necessary to fulfill a certain set of moral and spiritual conditions to overcome so many mental fetters and spiritual hindrances prevalent in our human condition. Mental fetters are called “*samyojanas*”. *Samyojanas* tie us to the vicious cycle of “perpetual wandering” (*samsara*). There are ten mental fetters:

1. the belief in a permanent personality of self view (*sakkayaditthi*);
2. skeptical doubt (*vicikiccha*)
3. clinging to mere rules and rituals (*silabbataparamasa*);
4. sensual desire, sensuous craving (*kama-raga*);
5. ill-will (*vyapada*), aversion, anger (*patigha*);
6. craving for existence in the world of Pure Form (*rupa-raga*);
7. craving for existence in the world of Non-Form (*arupa-raga*);
8. conceit, pride (*mana*);
9. restlessness (*uddhacca*);
10. ignorance, spiritual blindness, delusion (*avijja*)

If we are free from the ten fetters we will enter the Noble Abode of the triple Gateway to Liberation.

Now let us direct our attention again to the Divine Abode, the Four Sublime States (*brahma-vihara*) and the need to understand them so as to put them into practice in our daily lives. The primary objective is the diligent work of insight meditation in order to fulfill certain moral or mental conditions necessary to set about finding our way to the definite purification of our ordinary vision. The heart of this is developing lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. As long as we are not free from the Ten Fetters we have only a quick passing glance of the four *brahma-vihara*. As human life is so rare and valuable we must make the most of it, but unfortunately, by the time we understand the precious quality of being alive, most of this lifetime may already be gone.

Human beings can be easily overcome by sloth, lack of energy, spiritual apathy, moral sluggishness, boredom, torpor and lack of interest in far-reaching things pertinent to their own spiritual well-being and to the total welfare of other living beings. We all have nagging doubts about our aspirations and high ideals; we are frequently ready to take refuge in uncertainty, indecision and delusion, instead of in the joyful radiance of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Hatred, greed, mental worry, restlessness and resentment are deep-rooted in many of the well-meaning Buddhist devotees. These states, when out of control, are so strong and so much a part of our mental structure that they can not be easily changed, skillfully transformed or definitely eliminated.

Many homes and buildings in our great urban areas and in small villages were built out of lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and remarkable equanimity despite devastating earthquakes, floods and fires which may wipe out complete communities. These qualities have developed a sense of solidarity among human beings. That is their application in worldly welfare of humanity.

People, however, are continually harassed by uncertainty, anxiety, anger, hatred, lust, impatience, and the like. These arise from the Five Hindrances (*nivarana*), those obstacles and disturbances which blind our mental and spiritual vision. They are:

1. sensuous desire (*kamacchanda*)
2. ill-will (*vyapada*)
3. sloth and torpor (*thina-middha*)
4. restlessness and mental worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*)
5. skeptical doubt (*vicikiccha*)

All of these five hindrances are the causes of annoyance, confusion, and mental problems. The long-term objective of mindfulness and concentration is to build moral support within ourselves to rid our body and mind of these hindrances. The beginning meditation practice is to open our mind to thinking precisely on the elimination of sloth and torpor. Secondly, we continue meditating with more energy and sustained thought (*vicara*) to get rid of skeptical doubt. Thirdly, we dwell in rapture, in joy (*piti*) after having destroyed sloth and torpor; as joy or rapture is the natural consequence of rigorous thinking and enduring thought, we get rid of uncertainty and skeptical doubt; only the simple life with rigorous (*vitakka*) thinking is able to know the full meaning of joy or rapture.

Joy or rapture destroys hatred (*dosa*) and gets rid of ill-will. After joy comes happiness, true happiness (*sukha*) that eliminates all restlessness and mental worry. With pure happiness we enter the fourth meditation which is fully transformed into integral concentration or intense absorption in the definite state of one-pointedness (*ekaggata*), thereby removing greed (*lobha*) or sensuous desire (*kamacchanda*). If we do not cast away sensuous desire we are not capable of dwelling with freedom of mind and therefore will continue to be bound to the other four hindrances.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya* (IX, 40) it is said that there is temporary suspension of the Five Hindrances (*nivaranani*) upon entering, what is called the “first absorption”.

‘He has cast away **sensuous desire**; he dwells with a heart free from sensuous desire; from desire he cleanses his heart.’

‘He has cast away **ill-will**; he dwells with a heart free from ill-will, cherishing love and compassion towards all living beings; he cleanses his heart from ill-will.’

‘He has cast away **sloth and torpor**; he dwells free from sloth and torpor; loving the light, with watchful mind, with clear consciousness, he cleanses his mind from sloth and torpor.’

‘He has cast away **restlessness and mental worry**; dwelling with mind undisturbed, with heart full of peace, he cleanses his mind from restlessness and mental worry.’

‘He has cast away **skeptical doubt**; dwelling free from doubt, full of confidence in the good, he cleanses his heart from doubt.’

‘He has put aside these five hindrances, and come to know these paralyzing defilements of the mind. And far from sensual impressions, far from un-wholesome things, he enters into the first absorption...’

It is emphasized by these affirmations that whenever we succeed in casting away ill-will we will dwell with a heart cherishing love and compassion toward all living beings. *Vyapada* means ill-will, a synonym for *dosa*, which means “hatred” or “anger”, one of the three unwholesome roots (*mula*); namely (1) greed (*lobha*), (2) hate (*dosa*) and (3) delusion (*moha*)

Section VI: The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

In this section we will look more closely at the Four Sublime States and their relationship with, and development through, training in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*).

In *The Path of Purification*, (*Visuddhi Magga*), Buddhaghosa gives us some concise thoughts on the effect of each of the four *brahma-vihara* on the ethical purification. It says:

1. With respect to the essence of **lovingkindness**, it has the characteristic of devotion (*pavatti*) in relation to others’ welfare (IX, 93)
2. With respect to the essence of **compassion** (*karuna*), it has the characteristic of devotion to removing others’ suffering...It has the function of not tolerating others’ suffering, not enduring others’ suffering (IX, 94). The meditative cultivation of compassion is the effective way to remove harmfulness (IX, 108).
3. **Sympathetic Joy** has ‘the characteristic of rejoicing’...It has the function of being non-envious, un-envious’ (IX, 95)...The meditative cultivation of sympathetic joy is the effective way to remove displeasure (IX, 108).

4. **Equanimity** has... ‘the characteristic of devotion to the aspect of even-mindedness with regard to sentient beings. It has the function of seeing beings equally’ (IX, 96). The meditative cultivation of equanimity is the effective way to remove lust (*raga*) (IX, 108).

It should be noted that equanimity as one of the Four Sublime Abodes is quite different from equanimity in the sense of “feeling”... ‘the former is neutrality with regard to sentient beings; the latter is the feeling of neither pleasure nor pain that accompanies various states of consciousness’ [*Visuddhi Magga*, IV, 158, 162; cf. and H.B. Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism*.]

As yet, little is known of the method of practicing lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, but, according to the Pali tradition, the only way to practice and realize these states is by “mindfulness”, which in the famous *Maha Satipatthana Sutta* is described as *ekayano maggo*. According to Nyanaponika Thera, this way of mindfulness is the ... ‘heart of Buddhist meditation...the heart of the entire doctrine (*dhamma-hadaya*)’, [*The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*] Concerning the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*), the Buddha said: “This is the sole way, monks, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destroying of pain and grief, for reaching the right path, for the realization of *nibbana*, namely, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, these are: (1) contemplation of the body; (2) contemplation of feeling; (3) contemplation of mind, and (4) contemplation of mind-objects. They can be expressed in Sanskrit as:

1. *kaya-smrty-upasthana*, application of mindfulness to body
2. *vedana-smrty-upasthana*, application of mindfulness to feeling.
3. *cita-smrty-upasthana*, application of mindfulness of mind
4. *dharma-smrty-upasthana*, mindfulness of all things

All things are realized in our mind and by our attention through mindfulness, which means “attention with clear comprehension” (*sampajanna*). The technique for Mindfulness Training is described concretely by Nyanaponika Thera in *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*.

‘*Satipatthana*, the training in *right mindfulness* is culture of mind in its highest sense...Morality’s safest roots lie in a true culture of the heart. In the Buddha’s teaching, this culture of the heart has a prominent place, and finds an ideal expression in the four *Sublime States* or *Divine Abodes of the Mind* (*brahma-vihara*): Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathetic joy and Equanimity. Selfless and boundless lovingkindness is the basis of the other three qualities as well as of any effort for ennobling the mind. Therefore, in the *Satipatthana* method too, a primary task of Mindfulness is to watch that no deed, word or thought offends against the spirit of unbound lovingkindness (*metta*). The cultivation of it should never be absent from the path of the disciple.’

The Buddha laid the greatest emphasis on morality (*sila*). We stress again the three sections of Eight-Fold Path – virtue, concentration and wisdom. Virtue, or morality (*sila*), is the beginning and sustaining element. Fixing one’s mind on the subject of mindful meditation, the devotee washes out the impurities of the mind. And, all three “trainings” go hand in hand, because without *sila* practice one can not begin to enter the path of mindfulness through concentration to the realm of wisdom

In *Digha Nikaya* (III, 223 f), there is a discourse on the “Irradiation of Friendliness, Compassion, Tenderness and Equanimity”, which could be considered a model text in a semantic matrix for nearly all of the later elaborations concerning the Four Sublime Abodes in the development of Mahayana Buddhism. The text under reference consists of four paragraphs, each one being composed of the same structural harmony as follows:

‘Idh’, avuso, bhikkhu metta-sahagatena cetasa ekam disam pharitva viharati, tatha dutiyam, tatha tatiyam, tatha catutthim. Iti uddham adho tiriya sabbadhi sabbatthataya sabbavantam lokam metta-shabagatena cetasa vipulena mahaggatena appamanema averena avyapajjhena pharitva viharati.’

The following literal translation is rendered carefully by R.E.A Johansson in *Pali Buddhist Texts*:

‘Friends, now the monk remains pervading one quarter then a second, then a third and a fourth, with a mind filled with friendliness, up, down, horizontally: in all directions, everywhere, he goes on pervading the whole world with a mind filled with friendliness, extensive, expanded, boundless, free from hate and malevolence.’

The same paragraph, with different English rendering of the Pali phrases are found in *The Vision of Dhamma* (Nyanaponika Thera, p.251). The words of Lord Buddha:

‘Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with lovingkindness, likewise the second, the third and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with lovingkindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.’

Regarding the other three paragraphs, there is the same structural elegance and economy of contextual symmetry where one can easily see the focus. After *metta* (lovingkindness) in the first phrase, we see *karuna* (compassion) at the beginning of the second, and so on through sympathetic joy and equanimity in the third and fourth paragraphs. The order shown here is found only in the Pali, but the central axis of the structure and substructure is also easily visible in different English versions. The text is uniform in mentioning all Abodes of the Four Sublime States.

On the above quoted text of the Buddha, the following remarks seem to be pertinent:

1. The “heart” or “mind” is not a being among other beings.
2. Space is not construed simply as being with its modes of being such as the “ten directions”.
3. There is non-duality between heart and space, and we are endowed with the unlimited possibility of the heart to give space to everything. Therefore, we have the tremendous potentiality to “dwell pervading” (*pharitva viharati*): “he dwells pervading, he goes on filling”, *viharati* expresses duration, and essential mode of temporality.
4. Since the heart is condition of possibility of space, and intentionally is the movement of the heart itself, the heart is able to “dwell pervading everywhere”, encompassing all directions.
5. The essence of the heart consists in the boundlessness, the immeasurable, the endless of the “Encompassing Being”, which is empty; emptiness or void – that is empty of its own nature (*svabhava sunyata*). The Four Divine Abodes in Nagarjuna’s *Letter to a Friend* are rooted in the teaching of the “void”.

6. Only the void or emptiness (*sunyata*) of the heart could render possible the transformation of everything and the realization of the transference of the “other” and “self” (*paratma parivartana*) and the equality of the self and another (*paratma samata*). This leads to the supreme practice of equanimity as expounded in Santideva’s *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, Atisa’s *Lamp for the Path* and the *Lam Rim* spiritual method of the *Gelug* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.
7. The Four Sublime Abodes are transformed into the most important dwellings for the Bodhisattva’s way of spiritual practice, considered as the “great skilful means”: great lovingkindness, great compassion, great sympathetic joy, great equanimity inseparable from the Great Perfection of Wisdom (*mahaprajnaparamita*, Skrt).

Section VII: Emptiness – Openness in the Mahayana

Let us now examine the scope of “emptiness” (*sunyata*) by introducing the eighteen types of Openness. This is relevant to seeing how work and study on the “perfection of wisdom” dove-tails with the abodes of the Sublime Abode and the Divine Abode” Emptiness-Openness, Signlessness and Desirelessness.

These types are:

1. Inner Openness (*adhyatma-sunyata*)
2. Outer Openness (*bahirdha-sunyata*)
3. Inner and Outer Openness (*adhyatma bahirdha-sunyata*)
4. Openness of Openness (*sunyata-sunyata*)
5. Great Openness (*maha-sunyata*)
6. Openness of ultimate meaning (*paramartha-sunyata*)
7. Openness of what is compounded (*samskrta-sunyata*)
8. Openness of what is not compounded (*asamskrata-sunyata*)
9. Openness of boundless or the unlimited (*atyanata-sunyata*)
10. Openness of the beginningless and the endless (*anavagra-sunyata*)
11. Openness of the undispersed (*anavakara-sunyata*)
12. Openness of the “Being” itself of all beings (*prakrti-sunyata*)
13. Openness of all the dharmas (*sarva-dharma-sunyata*)
14. Openness of the self characteristic (*sva-laksana-sunyata*)
15. Openness of the non-attained (*anupalambha-sunyata*)
16. Openness of non-beingness (*abhava-sunyata*)
17. Openness of self-beingness (*svabhava-sunyata*)
18. Openness of non-beingness of the self-beingness (*abhava-svabhava-sunyata*) [Nagarjuna’s *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra*; Kumarajiva’s translation: *Taisho-shinshu-daizokyo*, vol. XXV, ch.31]. (The above in Sanskrit)

The eighteen types of Openness are the *Prajnaparamita*, (Skrt.) elaboration of the abodes of the Noble Abode. According to the Pali tradition, the Three Abodes are listed in ascending order of spiritual and mystical hierarchy: from the Heavenly Abode (four meditations in the Realm of Pure Form) to the Divine, or Sublime Abode (the Four Brahma Vihara), finally to the Noble Abode, consisting of Openness, Signlessness and Desirelessness. In the Mahayana tradition there is a complete transcendence of all three Abodes, one in all three and all three in one. Now there is only interdependence and interpenetration among them. The Mahayana places doctrinal emphasis on “great compassion” (*maha-karuna*) which is the begin-all and end-all of the Bodhisattva’s Path of Enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

Section VIII: Conclusion: The Now-Moment

The foregoing is a brief discussion of the Four Sublime States as the focal point of the Heavenly, the Divine and the Noble Abodes. Now in conclusion there is a need to reflect again on their being linked to mindful meditation and constant practice of virtue (*sila*). There is a true sequence in meditation, as we see to make our meditation meaningful, to eliminate the Five Hindrances, most importantly the first one, that of “sense desires”. In the words of the Buddha, “(the hindrances) are associated with pain and do not lead to *nibbana*”. If our task is to reach *nibbana*, it is then through *kammic* intervention that our work gives us the energy to proceed in that direction by setting the now-moment when *nibbana* appears as a fragile part of our psyche.

R.E.A Johansson, psychologist, in *The Psychology of Nirvana*, states:

‘The problem of the Buddha was the human situation here and now: suffering, as conditioned by impermanence, *kamma* and rebirth. To eradicate suffering and stop the chain of causes leading over to new life was his aim.’

In this context, Johansson concludes that one’s mental (psychological) health and Buddhist practice arrive at the same destination – *nibbana*. The truth to follow is the elimination of sense desires, and that with the diligent practice of lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity in meditation. In all areas of life, our human condition of happiness and freedom is not based, to any extent, upon the dictates of the self or ego. In living a moral (*sila*) life, according to the standard of the Buddha’s teachings, we are free from attachments to the self and causes of suffering, ignorance and rebirth.

Finally for a concluding thought on freedom and happiness, let’s look at the Buddha’s teachings which punctuate the all-out endeavor to eliminate non-attachment. The Most Venerable Thich Thien An, Vietnamese master and Buddhist scholar, warned devotees to not become attached to happiness, lovingkindness and even the *Dharma* (Skrt.). He relates one Vietnamese writer’s analogy of happiness being like the butterfly. It is beautiful, flying, and we enjoy its freedom, but do not try to catch it. Caught in the hand, or net, it becomes no more than an insect – robbed of its beauty of flight. If one makes Buddhahood the *object* (to be caught like the butterfly) and oneself the *subject* (the catcher), that is creating a false dualism and the need to discriminate, nullifying any work toward equanimity.

In essence, the spirit of the Buddha-Dhamma is that of non-duality; great compassion is great wisdom – there is no difference. There is no independent self-standing being. We are all interdependent – connected to everything, and

everything is fleeting. As emphasized earlier, our life, our present existence, is just a fleeting moment on this earth... which lasts no longer than a billionth part of an eye-wink, or a flash of lightning. Yet, it is this now-moment that opens the immense richness of the earth – if we learn to pervade every place equally with our hearts filled with lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

MAY ALL BEINGS BE HAPPY AND WELL

Afterword The Life of Sakyamuni Buddha

On the first full-moon day in May, Buddhists all over the world celebrate the three major events in the Buddha's life – his birth, his enlightenment and his passing away. The Buddha, as he was manifest in human form in our world, is called Sakyamuni Buddha. He was a prince and only son of the king of the Sakya clan in Northern India.

This child was known by his personal, family name of Siddhartha Gautama, Prince of the Sakyas. He was born into the Gautama family in the year 660 Before Christian Era (B.C.E). In remembrance of Siddhartha's birth, Buddhists listen to the story and read the scriptures (suttas) about these holy events in his life and his teachings. Near the time of giving birth, his mother, Queen Maya, asked to be taken to her parents' home, where her child should be born. Lumbini park, a quiet, serene place was on the way and some distance from the palace grounds. It was there, accompanied by her court (her husband, King Suddhodana was not with her) Siddhartha was born.

He lived his early years in princely fashion, but on the upper floor for the palace so that he would be protected from seeing and knowing of the ills and woes of the outside world. At age sixteen he married Yasodhara, a beautiful princess. Upon venturing into the streets of the city to perform his princely duties, he saw sickness, old age and death as a condition of many people, and the world was lacking true happiness. He became dissatisfied with his life as a Prince, wanting to be able to help all human beings overcome their suffering.

At the age of twenty-nine, soon after his princess gave birth to their only son, Rahula, Prince Siddhartha left the palace, giving up a crown that held the promise of power and glory. In the guise of an ascetic, he retreated into forest solitude to seek a solution for the problems of life, in quest of the ultimate security from bondage to the cycle of innumerable births and deaths. Dedicated to this noble task, he sought guidance from famous religious teachers hoping these masters of meditation would show him the path to liberation. But, their spiritual experiences were not enough; he sought the supreme Enlightenment he thought they had. He left them, and five beggar-monks known as "mendicants" joined him as his first disciples. He was driven to soar to the heights of liberation, thinking that his deliverance could be gained only by self-mortification as an ascetic.

But, after six years of this life of self-denial, undernourished and starving, he came to death's door and found himself no closer to his goal. He made the declaration, "I have not found liberation by these austere practices, so how can I lead others toward enlightenment". After he took milk from a maiden to ward off death, his five disciples left him – for he did not impress them as a guru. He then went to Gaya and sat under a fig tree and decided to sit there until he reached enlightenment. For seven days and nights he applied himself to mindfulness on in-and-out breathing, and during the three watches of the seventh night, he began his progression to full enlightenment. He experienced life events necessary for all human beings and saw that the ills of greed, hatred and self-delusion were the causes of pain and suffering in this life.

Siddhartha knew their presence and later taught that growth out of these states was necessary for enlightenment. During the four hours of the **first watch** of the night, Siddhartha was able to recognize and admit that he was self-deluded to his own condition of humanness, which causes conflicts and disharmony at all attempts of happiness. In the **second watch** it became clear to him that the release of striving, yearning and attachments to self and things can open an insight into the cause of suffering. In the four hours of **third watch** of the night, he saw virtue as a condition of harmony with life events, and the practice of lovingkindness and compassion as the way to eliminate selfish desires. During this period he fought off visions of evil spirits which tempted him to return to his palace life of wealth and luxury.

To root out all ills of the mind and body by *mindful concentration* was the clarity which came to Siddhartha at dawn of the last watch. He experienced all intoxicants, impurities and biases pass from his body and mind; he understood that the desires to seek pleasures and comfort from without cause ignorance of the inward calm which is needed for the enlightened state. With this, he developed insight that the Middle Way was the manner to achieve balance in one's life and laid out the conditions of Eight-Fold Path, a way to end human suffering.

Thus did Siddhartha Gautama, on a full moon day at the age of thirty-five, attain **Supreme Enlightenment** to become the **Buddha**. The stages of his coming to see the Ultimate Truth of his teachings were clear; these were later to be revealed to the world as the *Dhamma*: the understanding of, and release from, suffering by The Four Noble Truths and practice of the Eight-Fold Path.

As he taught the *Dhamma*, his original five disciples joined him, as did thousands more. In this, his words were preserved by his *sangha*/disciples, and their followers have in turn taught these beliefs and practices to millions through the world. Buddhism spread peacefully, the only weapon being that of universal lovingkindness and compassion. After forty-five years of his ministry, Sakyamuni Buddha, the Enlightened One, passed away at the age of eighty, with this final admonition to his followers:

'Subject to constant change are all conditioned things. Strive on with heedfulness'.

The Buddha proved by his own experience that enlightenment and deliverance lie entirely in the hands of each one of us. Being an exponent of the strenuous life, by model of precept and examples to follow, the Buddha encourage his disciples to cultivate self-reliance with no dependence on external agents. The ills and disharmony of life must be rooted out by each person – as the path is cleared toward one's own salvation.